12-21-1995

SI-YUU-DZE * :Service Learning in Native Schools

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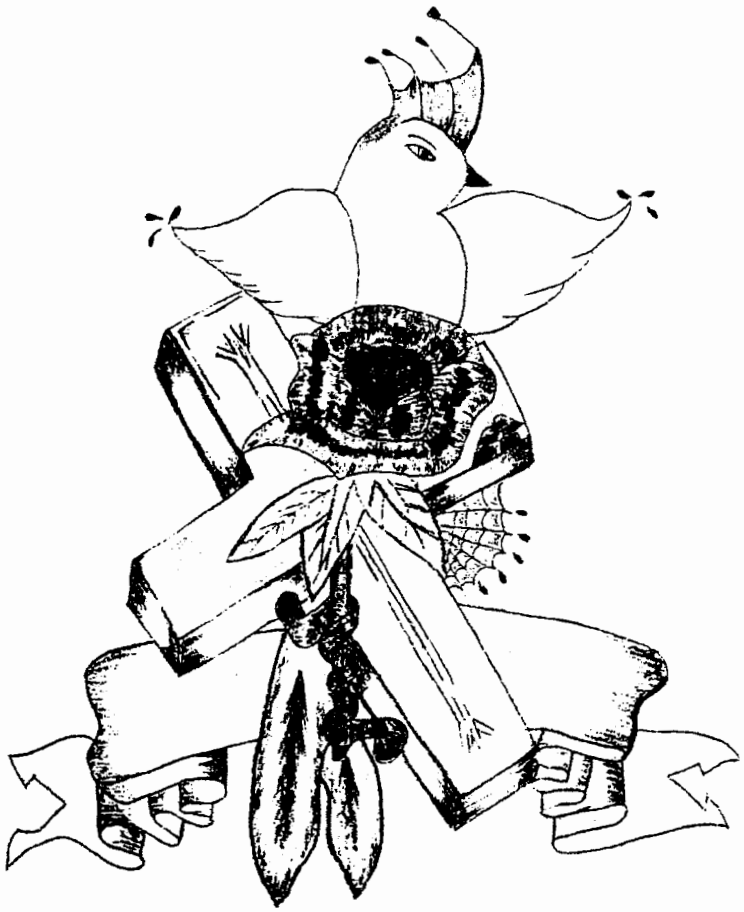
National Indian Youth Leadership Development Project, Inc.

For centuries, Native Americans have practiced brain-friendly education that incorporates active learning, the natural world, extended family, and mentorship. The author highlights essential educational issues facing Native learners and the importance of reclaiming service learning.



Art by Joe Garcia, a tenth-grade student at Harper Alternative School, Houston, Texas.

Background

When Europeans first came ashore in North America in the early 1500s, Native communities had an organized system for educating young people. A learning-by-doing process, usually under the mentorship of relatives and elders, was well developed. Customs, skills, spiritual practices, and languages were transmitted effectively according to locally determined priorities. The family, clan, and larger community provided a safety net for children. These indigenous people belonged to 300 language groups that had sophisticated interpretations of the Creation, viewing their role as caretakers of the continent.

The extended family provides the prototype for models of service in contemporary Native communities. As schooling of Native people came increasingly under the control of the federal government, education became more of a formal, foreign process, controlled by outsiders. Where once the natural world served as the learning environment, an abrupt shift to a regimented, classroom atmosphere took place. Traditionally, the worst form of punishment imaginable was banishment; and education became a new form of banishment, tearing young people away from their homes and families, thrusting them into an alien "learning" environment.

Vine Deloria, Jr. (1991), the Lakota educator and author, shares important insights into the conflict between the Euro-American model that has been imposed on Native Americans and the traditional approach. He states, "The old ways of educating af-

* *Si-yuu-dze is a term in the Keres language, spoken at Acoma Pueblo, which is translated by Acoma resident Harold Chino, as "everybody's work." It refers to the reciprocal nature of life in the pueblo.*

firmed the basic principle that the human personality was derived from accepting the responsibility to be a contributing member of a society. Kinship and clan were built upon the idea that individuals owed each other certain kinds of behaviors, and that if each individual performed his or her task properly, society would function." Deloria goes on to say, "Education in the traditional setting occurs by example and not as a process of indoctrination." He summarizes by stating, "The final ingredient of traditional tribal education is that accomplishments are regarded as the accomplishments of the group or family, not the individual."

The *Quality Education for Minorities* (1990) report identified the following factors as keys to the failure of education programs aimed at Native people in America:

- The process and goals of education were defined by the dominant group.
- The language and culture of the people were not valued.
- The needs and goals of the Native communities were not considered.
- Education programs failed to acknowledge tribal sovereignty.
- Education systems assumed a nonexistent homogeneity among tribes.

It is against this historical/cultural backdrop that the essential issues facing Native people in the education arena come into focus:

- Outside control vs. community control
- Indoctrination vs. "organic" learning
- Individuality vs. group identity
- Competition vs. cooperation
- Acquisition (of material things) vs. value placed on giving away (the most valuable things)
- Secular, "scientific" orientation to the natural world vs. spiritual orientation

A shift in official policy occurred when the Indian Self-Determination Act (Public Law 93-638) was passed into law in 1973. This legislation offered Native people some measure of control over education programs serving Native children. Progress, although difficult to quantify, has been made on several fronts—increased numbers of Native teachers and administrators in the schools; "contract" and "grant" schools, where communities contract with the Bureau of Indian Affairs to run their own schools; creation of tribal colleges on reservations; inclusion of Native culture and language in the curriculum, etc.

Potentially the most important trend is one that did not require specific legislation. Work done by the National Indian Youth Leadership Project (NIYLP) over several years recognizes that traditional values still exist within Native cultures, that these can form the basis for significant educational change, that learning has always been rooted in the culture of Native people and is an organic part of life, and that Native cultures have concepts and terms for what is now being called service learning which still is actively practiced in many communities.

Recent dropout studies done on the Navajo reservation also confirm that Native students who are well-grounded in their Native traditions are more likely to do well in the school system and go on to higher education (Platero, 1986). Schools that build on the strengths of the Native culture and integrate traditional concepts, such as service, will better prepare their students to succeed in the larger society.

Much of our work in Native communities over a period of years points to the potential effectiveness of what now is called service learning. Roger Buffalo Head, a Ponca educator, said at the National Service Learning Conference in 1991:

> One of the things that has interested me over the years in terms of Native education, what you now call Service Learning, is how Native people transmitted knowledge and culture in their own communities. Yet, this was never accepted as a legitimate way of transmission of knowledge in this country. So Native people's views often conflicted with those of higher education or public school people about how knowledge should be transmitted from one generation to the next. It's good to see that you are beginning to come around to our point of view about how young people should learn.

In the Keres language, spoken at Acoma and Laguna pueblos, the term, *si-yuu-dze*, refers to the many communal projects that are done in the pueblos as part of the ceremonial or agricultural cycle. In the Zuñi language, the term *yanse-lihanna*, describes the same concept. There are numerous other examples.

The goal of NIYLP is to gain an understanding of the connections between these traditional concepts and the learning process. Through our work with seven Native schools in New Mexico, as part of the Kellogg/DeWitt Wallace Reader's Digest-funded National Service Learning Initiative, we have seen several creative approaches that are grounded in the traditions of the community.

EXAMPLES OF SERVICE LEARNING PROJECTS

Acoma Pueblo

Sky City Community School has developed a program they call "Buddy Works," where eighth-graders tutor kindergarten students. Prior to any formal contact between the two groups, the eighth-graders develop their lesson plans, taking into consideration the specific developmental needs of their younger students. Learning goals are identified and strategies planned. The program has had some interesting results. Principal Charlotte Garcia reports that attendance, for both the eighth-graders and the kindergarten "buddies," improved on Fridays, the

day the tutoring sessions occurred. In addition, Buddy Works led to the development of Parentworks, which involves these same eighth-graders with the parents of their kindergarten students. The approaches are shared with the parents to reinforce the practice of reading to youngsters.

Zuñi Pueblo

Sixth-grade students at Zuñi Mid School decided they wanted to clean up Eustace Lake, a small lake within walking distance of the school. They hauled trash from the water, built trails, planted trees, and took water samples. Their goal was to restock the lake with fish. The adjoining recreational area was littered with trash, and picnic areas had been vandalized. Students set out to revitalize the recreational area. The students used a surveyor's transit to survey and map the area, learning all the necessary skills as part of the project. The project is ongoing, and a sign that says "Zuñi Mid School Service Learning Project" now marks the area. Police and other community agencies now monitor the area, and it is a source of pride for ZMS students and faculty.

National Indian Youth Search & Rescue

No model of service learning for young people is more dramatic than the National Indian Youth Search & Rescue program. The NIYSAR program is the only state-sanctioned SAR program in the United States that is staffed by Native American high school students. Students from Zuñi, Acoma, Laguna, Pine Hill, Ft. Wingate, and Navajo, New Mexico, (the program continues to spread into other Native communities) must complete more than 110 hours of training in such areas as First Aid/CPR, map and compass skills, tracking, and wilderness survival. They must become thoroughly competent in the use of sophisticated navigational equipment and radios. A mock search with the state SAR personnel and state patrol, where all competencies are demonstrated, is the final exam. After successful completion, the team may be called out at all hours of the day and night, year round, to search for lost hunters, hikers, and victims of plane crashes in remote areas. They also may be called to provide assistance with any natural disasters that may occur in the region.

An arrangement has been worked out, in Zuñi, whereby students receive elective credit and can be released from school in the event of a call. The Zuñi schools were the first in the state of New Mexico to offer credit for community service through the SAR program. Since 1992, when the Zuñi SAR was formed, the teams have been on numerous searches, most of which resulted in the subjects being found alive. Feedback from agencies active in SAR indicated that these students often are better trained than the adults who take part in SAR (NIYLP, 1992).

TRAINING OPPORTUNITIES

The NIYLP has conducted national leadership camps for 12 years. The camps serve fifth- through eighth-graders and draw participants from the United States and Canada. Key roles at camp are filled by high school students, many of whom are former camp participants, who offer their services in big brother/sister roles. Adults who are interested in learning more about the model must attend a camp session in a volunteer staff role. NIYLP provides training and technical assistance to Native communities that want to start a program. NIYLP offers a well-thought-out model that can be adapted to the culture of the community. This model is described in detail in the manual *Something Shining Like Gold, But Better.*

Service Learning Institutes

NIYLP offered the first Native American Service Learning Institute in January 1995 in Zuñi. The three-day institute covered the roots of service in Native traditions, the key elements of service learning, examples of projects developed by Native teachers, hands-on practice in an actual project, to name a few. Further regional training will be offered in the Spring of 1995.

Summary

An Iroquois prophecy tells us that the youth of today, especially those born in the last 15-20 years, are the old Native leaders returning. A Native leader must be a servant of the people, and we must use the "best of both worlds" to help young people. We must look to Native communities for strengths to build on, refusing to focus strictly on the deficits that may be apparent. We must focus on positive alternatives for Native youth and provide opportunities to develop the skills that will help them become the leaders of tomorrow. With this in mind, the NIYLP has been trying to improve the educational experience for Native youth. Its programs combine the experiential activities, outdoor adventure, community service, national leadership camps, and school-based programs, including training for school personnel, to reconnect Native education with the communities and cultures of the people. As Native people, we all have a responsibility to give something back.

McClellan Hall (Cherokee and Pawnee) is founder and director of the National Indian Youth Leadership Project, Gallup, New Mexico. He has been active in work with Native American youth for 20 years as a teacher, counselor, administrator, and director to two tribal alternative schools. For further information, contact Mr. Hall at National Indian Youth Leadership Project, 605 Vandenbosch Parkway, Gallup, NM 87301.

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